

Teaching Media Literacy with Graphic Novels

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Abstract

Background: A current problem in media literacy studies is whether or not to categorize graphic novels as media literacy texts. Thus, this article begins with a review of current media literacy research and its emphasis on defining media literacy texts as texts that rely on both print literacies and image literacies. Because graphic novels rely on both print literacies and image literacies, they qualify as media literacy texts and can be taught as such in K-12 classrooms.

Goals: The purpose of this article is to use current media literacy research to support identifying and teaching graphic novels as media literacy texts in K-12 classrooms.

Method: Current media literacy research served to create a rationale for identifying graphic novels as appropriate media literacy texts to use in K-12 classroom settings.

Results: Graphic novels qualify as media literacy texts and can be taught in K-12 classrooms.

Key words: graphic novel, media literacy, K-12 classroom

圖像小說在媒體教育上的使用

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摘要

背景：現今媒體教育研究其中一個問題，乃應否將圖像小說分類為媒體教育課文，故此，本文先回顧當前媒體教育範疇上的研究，並將重點放在定義媒體教育課文上。另外，由於圖像小說依賴印刷和圖像兩種形式，所以它被認為是合資格的媒體教育課文，同時亦合適於K-12教室內運用。

目的：本文的目的是希望利用當前媒體教育的研究，來支持圖像小說在K-12教室內，作為一種媒體教育課文的鑒定與教授。

方法：使用當前媒體教育研究鑒定圖像小說，是否在K-12教室內一種合適的媒體教育課文之理論基礎。

結果：圖像小說被認為是合資格的媒體教育課文，同時亦合適於K-12教室內運用。

關鍵字：圖像小說、媒體教育、K-12教室

In 2009 I was writing my first book, *Teaching Graphic Novels* (2010). And, as I wrote my way from chapter-to-chapter, I became more and more nervous about chapter 5, “Teaching Media Literacy with Graphic Novels.” Theoretically anchored in both media literacy and new literacy education graphic novels often find themselves placed in limbo between the two fields. Because graphic novels rely on image literacies they are often considered a new literacy text. However, as media literacy scholars point out, graphic novels rely on both image literacies and print-text literacies; thus, they are a media literacy text. So, are graphic novels a new literacy text or a media literacy text?

Although many literacy scholars are comfortable placing graphic novels in both categories, it is wise to have a sound rationale to support either choice. This paper will focus specifically on teaching graphic novels as media literacy texts. Section one provides a rationale and a theoretical framework for teaching graphic novels as media literacy texts; and section two suggests practical, classroom-friendly steps for teaching graphic novels as media literacy texts.

Section 1: Theoretical Framework for Teaching Graphic Novels as Media Literacy Texts

In 2003 Buckingham offered K-12 teachers a theoretical framework for labeling media literacy texts: “Media texts often combine several ‘languages’ or forms of communication - visual images (still or moving), audio (sound, music or speech), and written language” (p.4). As Buckingham explains, texts that rely on visual imagery (still or moving) qualify as media literacy texts. Thus, because they rely on visual, still image literacies, graphic novels qualify as media literacy texts.

Let’s pause for a frequently asked question: “Ok, Dr. Monnin, but why do we even want students to read graphic novels as media literacy texts? I want my students to be readers of ‘real’ literature?”

“What is ‘real’ literature?” I question.

“Reading with letters and words,” is often the response.

“Yes, and no. Here’s why...”

The work of Kress (2003), and many of our own everyday lives as 21st century citizens in technologically-developed nations, can help us rethink traditional views of literacy, and, in doing so, make a case for teaching graphic novels as media literacy texts in K-12 classrooms. According to Kress (2003), 21st century citizens are living during an extremely rare moment in history. This moment is so rare in fact that it has only happened once before. Second on the historical timeline to the 15th century invention of the printing press, we are currently living during the greatest communication revolution of all time. Due to advancements in modern technology, we no longer communicate predominantly in print-text literacies alone. Today, we communicate through a variety of different screen-like environments that ask us to be both print-text literate and image (still and/or moving) literate (Buckingham, 2003; Carter, 2007; Hobbs, 2007; Kist, 2004; Kress, 2003; Monnin, 2010). Image literacies and print-text literacies now share the stage.

For instance, take a minute to think about the various print-text literacies and image literacies you have read within the last twenty-four hours (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

| <p style="text-align: center;">Rethinking what counts as reading in the 21st century Gallego & Hollingsworth, <i>What Counts as Literacy</i> (2000)</p> |
|---|
| <p>Over the last twenty four hours,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you read your email? • Did you read anything on the Internet? • Did you read a publication that relies on images and print-text to illustrate its message(s)? • Did you read a comic book? • Did you read a text message? • Did you read a graphic novel? • Did you read iPod screen? • Did you watch (i.e., read) television or film? • Did you read a map, either online or on a piece of paper? • Did you read from a videogame screen? |

When Kress (2003) considers questions such as these, he reminds teachers that “The *world told* is a different world to *the world shown*” (p.1), and many modern literacy scholars agree (Buckingham, 2003; Carter, 2007; Hobbs, 2007; Kist, 2004, 2009; Kress, 2003; Monnin, 2010; Monnin & Carter, in press, 2010; The New London Group, 1996). Whether on a screen or in a stationary text (like a graphic novel), modern readers must know how to read both print-text literacies and image literacies.

The work of one of the world’s foremost education scholars concurs. Howard Gardner’s (1983) almost thirty-year-old work with multiple intelligences is now considered foundational to teaching both the told and the shown worlds. In 1983, Gardner’s *Frames of Mind* argued that teachers need to consider their students’ own unique learning styles. Gardner’s focus on two intelligences in particular -verbal-linguistic and visual-spatial-has become especially important to teaching media literacy with graphic novels.

Jenkins’ (2007) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* concurs with Gardner’s *Frames of Mind* (1983) and further explains that

since print-text literacies are no longer the dominant literacy, teachers should now-more than ever-merge their traditional teaching of print-text literacies (the verbal-linguistic learning style) with a new, contemporary focus on teaching image-text literacies (the visual-spatial learning style). Media literacy, Jenkins concludes, provides just the right pedagogical insight for teaching this now shared literacy stage.

And, because the graphic novel format relies on both print-text literacies and image literacies, and does in fact reflect media literacy’s emphasis on teaching a converged, shared literacy stage, it is an appropriate text for teaching media literacy in modern classrooms.

Section 2: Steps for Teaching Media Literacy with Graphic Novels

The purpose behind the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) is to help teachers implement media literacy education in “classrooms and livingrooms, in school and after school, anywhere that lifelong learners can be reached” (www.namle.net). Building upon NAMLE’s practitioner-friendly mission and purpose, the second

section of this paper will focus on the step-by-step process for teaching media literacy with graphic novels.

To begin teaching media literacy with graphic novels, teachers need to first select an appropriate graphic novel. With a focus on graphic novel reviews, standardized-alignment, and grade-level appropriate recommendations for both elementary and secondary classroom settings, Appendix 1 presents teachers with

some suggestions for finding appropriate graphic novels for their students.

After selecting a graphic novel, teachers can next introduce what many graphic novel scholars feel are the three most important graphic novel terms (Abel & Madden, 2008; Carter, 2007; McCloud, 1993, 2000, 2006; Monnin, 2010): panels, gutters, and balloons (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

| Step 1: Introduce Three Graphic Novel Terms | |
|---|--|
| Panels | "A visual or implied boundary, and the contents within it, that tell a piece of the story" (p.4).* |
| Gutters | "The space between the panels. In this space, the reader moves from one panel to the next and comes to a conclusion about what is happening" (p.4).* |
| Balloons | "Typically found inside of a panel, graphic novel balloons commonly create visual boundaries" that contain words, sounds, images, and other story elements to further the storyline (p.10).* |

*Monnin, K. (2010). *Teaching Graphic Novels*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House.

Here's an example of two panels, a gutter, and two balloons from *Adventures in Cartooning* (2009).

Figure 3:



In the first panel, readers see a magical elf, stating in a balloon, that someone needs cartooning help. Then, traveling through the gutter (the space between the panels), readers come to the second panel, which shows no elf and only a balloon with the word “poof.” These two panels, a gutter, and two balloons present readers with a magical elf and, then, the magical elf’s disappearance.

When students understand graphic novel panels, gutters, and balloons, they can next be asked to explore the graphic novel they will be reading.

Either as individuals or in pairs, students can next look through the graphic novel and find examples of panels, gutters, and balloons. Once students have had enough time to find examples, the whole class can share their findings.

Feeling pretty secure with the three graphic novel terms, students are now ready to think about the core concepts that inform reading media literacy texts. NAMLE and The Center for Media Literacy outline five core concepts behind reading media literacy texts (see Figure 4).

Figure 4:

| Step 2: The 5 Core Concepts Behind Teaching Media Literacy Texts | |
|---|--|
| 1. | “All media messages are constructed.” |
| 2. | “Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.” |
| 3. | “Different people experience the same media message differently.” |
| 4. | “Media have embedded values and points of view.” |
| 5. | “Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.” |
| Source: The Center for Media Literacy (http://www.medialit.org) | |

Starting with “All media messages are constructed” teachers can share their own interpretation of each concept, and then ask students to do the same.

Next, as students begin to read the graphic novel, teachers can ask them to keep the five core concepts of media literacy texts in mind: “So far in your reading, how do you think the five core concepts of media literacy are showing up in this graphic

novel?” If students have trouble thinking about the five core concepts of media literacy texts as a whole, teachers can ask about each concept individually.

Next, teachers can present Figure 5, which turns NAMLE and The Center for Media Literacy’s five core concepts of media literacy texts into five key questions of media literacy texts (see Figure 5).

Figure 5:

| Step 3: Five Key Questions of Media Literacy Texts | |
|---|---|
| 1. | “Who created this message?” |
| 2. | “What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?” |
| 3. | “How might different people understand this message differently?” |
| 4. | “What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?” |
| 5. | “Why is this message being sent?” |
| Source: The Center for Media Literacy (http://www.medialit.org) | |

With the five core concepts of media literacy texts now turned into five key questions of media literacy texts, teachers can next introduce a Think-Pair-Share (TPS) reading strategy. First, students should **Think** about the five key questions of media literacy texts. Then, students can **Pair-up** to discuss the five key questions of media literacy texts. Finally,

as a whole class, students can **Share** their ideas about the five key questions of media literacy texts.

At this point, students are ready to make the connection between the three most important graphic novel terms and reading media literacy texts (Step 4, see Figure 6).

Figure 6:

| Step 4: Questions that Link the Five Key Questions of Media Literacy To the Three Most Important Graphic Novel Terms | |
|---|--|
| 1. “Who created this message?” becomes... | Who created this/these panel(s)? Who created this/these gutter(s)? Who created this/these balloon(s)? |
| 2. “What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?” becomes... | What creative techniques were used to attract my attention to this/these panel(s)? What creative techniques are used to attract my attention to this/these gutter(s)? What creative techniques were used to attract my attention to this/these balloon(s)? |
| 3. “How might different people understand this message differently?” becomes... | How might different people understand this/these panel(s)? How might different people understand this/these gutter(s)? How might different people understand this/these balloon(s)? |
| 4. “What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?” becomes... | What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented, or omitted from, this/these panel(s)? What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented, or omitted from, this/these gutter(s)? What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from this/these balloons? |
| 5. “Why is this message being sent?” | Why are the panels sending this/these message(s)? Why are the gutters sending this/these message(s)? Why are the balloons sending this/these message(s)? |

Figure 6 rewords the five key questions of media literacy to consider the three most important graphic novel terms. Dependent upon how well teachers think their students have understood this direct link, Figure 6 can be assigned in-class or as homework.

To solidify student understanding, teachers can ask students to answer the questions found on Figure 6 each time they read a new section of the graphic novel. When they are finished, it is recommended

that teachers also engage students in whole class discussions of their various responses. In terms of assessment, and when students are finished reading the entire graphic novel, teachers can ask students to complete Figure 6 while reflecting on the entire graphic novel as a media literacy text.

Some Final Thoughts on Teaching Media Literacy with Graphic Novels

“A good education—one bound in experience and meaning making,” explains Dr. James Bucky Carter (2007), “is probably an education that has been enriched with a broad definition of art and culture” (p.3). When teachers enrich their language arts curriculum to include teaching media literacy with graphic novels, they are able to modernize both their own and their students’ understandings about what now counts as literacy (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000).

Although influential to embracing a modern and a broad definition of what now counts as literacy (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000), teaching media literacy with graphic novels is simply one pedagogical option. Thus, as this essay seeks to close its thoughts on teaching media literacy with graphic novels, it also seeks to encourage teachers to reconsider what they have typically regarded as appropriate literary texts. Beyond print-text literacies, and even beyond media literacy’s original focus on literacies of film and television (Masterman, 1985), modern teachers need to consider how all contemporary texts that rely on both print-text literacies and image literacies can be taught as media literacy texts. Teachers can begin by choosing a modern literacy text that relies on both print-text literacies and image-text literacies, like the graphic novel, and then link that media literacy text to the five core concepts and five key questions of media literacy texts.

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Appendix

A list of resources that offer elementary and secondary teachers graphic novel reviews, standardized-alignment, and grade-level appropriate recommendations.

- Monnin, K. (2010). *Teaching Graphic Novels*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House.
- Monnin, K. (In press, 2011). *Teaching Early Reader Comics & Graphic Novels*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House.
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- James Bucky Carter’s Blog: <http://ensaneworld.blogspot.com/>
- First Second Books: <http://firstsecondbooks.typepad.com/mainblog/>
- Sequential Art Narrative in Education / SANE Journal: www.sanejournal.net
- Capstone Publishers: <http://www.capstonepub.com> (Graphic Library link)
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Received: 4/15/2010; Revised: 8/25/2010; Accepted: 11/20/2010